THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI SALEEM IQBAL SHERWANI): (a) to (c) Yes Sir, India is deeply concerned over Pakistan's missile programme and its impact on the region's security. Government of India is committed to taking all necessary steps to safeguard to country's security and national interest in accordance with its own threat perceptions. Government closely monitors all developments including those relating to Pakistan's missile programme.

(d) The dialogue with Pakistan has been resumed at the Foreign Secretary level and, following the last round of discussions in Islamabad, a Joint Statement was issued which envisages discussions on "peace and security" issues. The substance and the modalities of these discussions will be elaborated at the next round of India-Pakistan Foreign Secretary level talks.

Liberalisation of Visa restrictions for Pak-stani and US Nationals

164. SHRI RAHASBIHARI BARIK: Will the PRIME MINISTER be pleased to state:

(a) whether Government have liberalised visa restrictions for Pakistani and the US nationals for visiting India;

(b) if so, what are the details of the liberalisation made;

(c) whether Government propose to liberalise visa restrictions for some other countries also; and

(d) if so, the details thereof?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRIMATI KAMLA SINHA): (a) and (b) In pursuance of encouraging people to people contact and promoting greater interaction among scholars, intellectuals, journalists, writers, artistes, businessmen and others, Government have unilaterally eased the issuance of visas to Pakistani nationals.

Under the liberalised policy, Government have decided to

(i) permit Pakistani tourists to visit India in groups;

(ii) increase the maximum number of cities in India that Pakistani nationals can visit from 8 to 12, with a further relaxation possible for senior citizens;

(iii) designate the International airport at Chennai as an additional checkpoint for the arrival and departure of Pakistani nationals;

(iv) grant one year triple-entry visas to eligible Pakistani businessmen and permit them to enter and exit through different check-points wherever required;

(v) 'Exemptions from Police Reporting' visas can be granted to artistes, journalists, students, poets, writers, senior citizens, children, as well as to businessmen recommended by the SAARC Chamber of Commerce;

(vi) permit reputed artistes from Pakistan to give commercial performances in India; and

(vii) waive visa fees for senior Pakistani citizens, artistes, poets writers, students and journalists. A proposal for liberalisation in visa for US nationals, on reciprocity basis is, under Government's active consideration.

(c) and (d) Rationalisation and liberalisation of visa regime is an ongoing process.

Steps for Bettlement of Indo-Nepal relations

165. SHRI RAHASBIHARI BARIK: Will the PRIME MINISTER be pleased to state:

(a) whether government have taken steps to establish better Indo-Nepal relations;

(b) whether the Prime Minister has signed some agreements with the Govern ment of Nepal during his last visit to that country;

(c) if so, the salient features thereof; and

(d) the details of steps taken to establish better Indo-Nepal bilateral relations?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRIMATI KAMLA SINHA): (a) Yes, Sir.

(b) No, Sir.

(c) Does not arise.

(d) A number of steps have been taken in this regard. The Prime Minister of India paid an official goodwill visit to Nepal from 5-7 June, 1977. Nepal's request for an additional transit route to Bangladesh via Phulbari was .accepted. I The modalities are being workled out. The Trade Treaty valid for five years, was revised and renewed through ex-change of letters on 3 December, 1996. India has agreed to provide access, free of customs duties, and the quantitative restrictions, to all articles manufactured in Nepal, except three groups of items, namely alcoholic beverages, tobacco and cosmetics.

Demand by Nepal for transit route to Bangladesh

166. SHRIMATI VEENA VERMA:
SHRI SUSHIL KUMAR
SAMBHAJIRAO SHINDE:

Will the PRIME MINISTER be pleased to state:

(a) whether the Nepal Government during the recent visit of the Prime Minister to the country, had demanded a new transit route for Nepal to Banglad esh; and

(b) if so, what was the Prime Minister's response and Government's reaction thereto?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRIMATI KAMLA SINHA): (a) and (b) The Prime Minister of India paid an official goodwill visit from 5-7 June, 1997 to Nepal. During the visit Nepal's request for an additional transit route to Bangladesh via Phulbari was accepted. It was also agreed that the modalities and working arrangement will be decided within the next two months. The new arrangements would be reviewed six months thereafter.

Development of hatf missile by Pakistan

167. SHRIMATI VEENA VERMA:
SHRI SUSHIL KUMAR
SAMBHAJIRAO SHINDE:

Will the PRIME MINISTER be pleased to state:

(a) whether government's attention has been drawn to the report in the "Asian Age" of June 13, 1997, captioned "Hatf is Pakistan's reply to Prithvi;

(b) if so, whether Government have confirmed the report that Pakistan had developed its own missiles Hatf during Ms. Benazir Bhutto's regime to be pre sented to the nation on 50th Anniversary of Pakistan; and

(c) if so, what is Government's reaction thereto?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRIMATI KAMLA SINHA): (a) Yes, Sir.

(b) and (c) government have carefully monitored Pakistan's pursuit of a missile programme with external assistance. This programme which has been carried on since the early 1980s includes the Hatf series of surface to surface missiles. There has been no independent confirmation of reports regarding the recent firing of a Hatf missile by Pakistan. Government is taking all steps necessary to ensure the country's security.